

In the Timeline Where She's an Easy Choice

They don't own a broom yet, so Mariella cuts Trey's hair in the bathtub. Shirtless in a pair of well-worn briefs, his arm draped over the rim, he looks like Christ after the crucifixion, minus the blood. She pulls a strand, flecked with silver, and snips, the dark hairs drifting through the air and landing like scratches against the tub.

"Pet the dog again," she says, "and I'll cut your ear off."

But his eyes are closed, and he doesn't see the way she squints her eye and holds the scissors, wrist angled like a pirate's hook.

"Mercy," he says, Zeke licking his outstretched fingers. "I beg you."

Later, they walk the poorly lit mile to the beach and leave their shoes at the lifeguard stand. Without a broom, the sand they bring back from this nightly trip settles into the dips and ridges of their trailer. They find it at the bottom of their coffee cups, clinging to the bar of soap in the bathroom.

Last week, they watched Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* without subtitles. During the sex scene, where the man and woman writhe in the sand, beetle-like, their necks and backs and pincer-fingers coated with the gritty sediment, Mariella said, "That'll be us by the end of the year." They made love on the futon then, the film's grainy hissing playing in the background. Like many movies they've started in this world, she wonders how it ends.

On the beach, Trey hands her a pebble shaped like a pair of stemless cherries and calls them testicles. She pockets the stone. They walk along the shifting beach with his arm across her shoulder, her hand cupping the soft curve above his hip. Once, in another timeline, he'd said the way their bodies fit together was like two pieces to a puzzle.

Here, he asks, "Am I crushing you?"

Ahead of them, Zeke barks at the retreating surf. Ghost crabs flutter underfoot. At the outfall pipe, they stop, and he pulls her toward him by her belt loops. The stone presses itself into her thigh. There's a breeze, and it passes through them. Above, the moon swings wide on its black noose.